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The 'Shultz Doctrine' Is Rendered Moot in Iran

By TERENCE SMITH

WASHINGTON — For months, Secretary of State George P. Shultz has been arguing that the time has come for the United States to use military force to either pre-empt or retaliate against international terrorism. The alternative, he has said, is for the United States to become the "Hamlet of nations," endlessly wringing its hands over whether and how to respond.

Last week, Mr. Shultz could cite fresh provocation: Four Arabic-speaking terrorists hijacked a Kuwaiti airliner with 161 people on board, isolated the Americans and killed two of them solely because they were Americans. The incident seemed to underscore the dangers facing the 77,032 American civilians who serve their country overseas.

A rescue attempt seemed out of the question. The United States has commando teams specially trained in storming hijacked airliners and freeing hostages. But cooperation was conspicuously missing in Teheran, where the United States is still vilified as the "great Satan." Even more, some United States officials said there was evidence that Iran was supporting the hijackers. Any assault force would have to be massive to protect both the hostages and itself against counterattack.

In the end, the hijacking concluded without any direct American action, other than strong rhetoric and diplomatic pressure applied through third countries. Two Americans were dead, two others came home battered and burned and there seemed to be little that the United States would or could do about it.

The Teheran hijacking illustrated the difficult choices that arise in attempting to implement the so-called Shultz Doctrine in a specific instance. "There was simply no practical way for the United States to use force in this case," observed Robert Kupperman, a counter-terrorism specialist at the Georgetown Center for Strategic and International Studies. "Any rescue team we sent in would have been killed along with the hostages."

"This case demonstrated that the Shultz Doctrine — the use of force — is at best a selective tool that does not apply in every instance," Mr. Kupperman said.

Another specialist, William Colby, the former Director of Central Intelligence, agrees, but he does not believe that the difficulties posed in the Kuwaiti hijacking necessarily invalidate the Shultz Doctrine. "Don't rule it out," he said. "The moment will come when we want to use force. And when we do, the public will support it."

No Easy Targets

Another aspect of Mr. Shultz's thinking, military retaliation, also seems difficult to apply in such an instance. What would be the target? The hijackers have disappeared into Iranian custody. Iran itself is too big a target, even assuming that concrete evidence of Iranian collusion could be obtained.

"If you could find a nice little Al Dawa training camp someplace, you could hit that," observed Mr. Colby. Al Dawa is the militant Shiite terrorist organization with which the hijackers are believed to be associated. Their principal demand throughout the hijacking was that Kuwait release 17 members of Al Dawa who were convicted of the bombings of the American Embassy and French consulate in Kuwait a year ago.

But both Mr. Kupperman and Mr. Colby said that such an action would be difficult to justify to the American public. Mr. Kupperman suggested instead that the United States should retaliate against Iran with economic weapons. "We could go into court in New York and tie up Iranian funds in American banks," he said. "That would provide some counter-terror theater, which is what we need in this case."

The best solution appears to be the other part of the Shultz Doctrine — pre-emption. The United States has redoubled its intelligence gathering efforts in recent months and has been able to blunt a number of terrorist threats against American diplomats in Beirut, Bogotá and El Salvador, among others. Italy scored a notable success two weeks ago when it rounded up a seven-man Lebanese terrorist group that it said was planning an attack on the American Embassy in Rome.

But American officials say it would require super-human intelligence to pre-empt a hijacking. "We are doing what we can," a senior State Department official said, "but there is no way to track every terrorist cell around the world."

In the end, the Shultz Doctrine may be more an effort to condition public opinion about terrorism than a specific prescription for coping with it. The Secretary of State is also trying to win a policy debate within the Administration, which remains divided over the wisdom and efficacy of using force against terrorism. Each new incident adds force to his argument and most specialists in the field agree that the United States is closer today to using force than it has been before.

"We have to strike a delicate balance," Mr. Kupperman said, "between being perceived as a paper tiger if we do nothing, and being seen as terrorists ourselves if we strike back in the wrong way. The correct answer lies somewhere in between."